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ABSTRACT

The advent of gender equity in schools has not been much easier than the advent of equality of educational opportunity for other atypical segments of the school population. Three common types of inequitable treatment of female students are gender bias in the classroom, exclusion of females from traditionally male activities, and sexual harassment. Minority and disadvantaged girls are recipients of discrimination in several forms. They are discriminated against their minority status; within their own racial and socio-economic groups; as well as by predominantly male policy formulation. The treatment and performance of female students will not change until a new educational paradigm is developed and implemented, one that sees all students as valuable and worthy of equitable treatment. To be successful, the new paradigm must incorporate three characteristics of previous successful innovative programs: the valuing of all students; provision of support services; and development of new interrelationships among home, school, and community. A comprehensive approach to gender equity encompasses 10 elements drawn from equitable programs for minority and disadvantaged populations. These elements address the school's philosophy of education, school policies and procedures, the necessarily broad scope of gender equity, integration of gender equity into the curriculum, extracurricular activities, school hiring and promotion practices, career guidance and counseling, information and support services, parent involvement, and student evaluation practices. (Author/SV)

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A Comprehensive Approach to Gender Equity

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RC 019 610

A Comprehensive Approach to Gender Equity

José A. Cárdenas, Ed.D.

Editor's note: The following article was adapted by the author from his book, Multicultural Education: A Generation of Advocacy, due to be published by Ginn Publishing Company in 1994.

Introduction

The advent of gender equity in schools has not been much different or more successful than the advent of equality of educational opportunity for other atypical segments of the school population.

Although there are many forms of inequitable treatment of female students, there are three types which have been thoroughly researched and reported in the literature. These three common types of inequitable treatment are: (1) gender bias in all aspects of school activity; (2) the exclusion of female students from traditionally male curricular and co-curricular activities; and (3) sexual harassment. A recent study of gender bias in the classroom undertaken by the American Association of University Women (AAUW) indicated an extensive amount of gender bias occurs specifically in instructional activity.

Gender bias in the classroom takes many forms, some direct and some indirect. Examples include teachers calling on boys more often than girls, encouraging more assertive behavior in boys than in girls, evaluating boys' papers for creativity and girls' for neatness, and giving boys the time and assistance needed to solve problems, while "helping" girls along by simply telling them the answers (AAUW, 1991).

Girls, particularly who are members of the dominant cultural group, tend to do better in areas of education compatible with the historic role of women in our society. However, there are areas of education traditionally perceived as masculine in which the performance of girls leaves much to be desired. These areas include math, science, and technology, and the specific curriculum and career areas associated with them.

The performance of female students from atypical populations exemplifies the worst failure of our schools. Minority and disadvantaged girls are commonly the recipients of the worst forms of discrimination in school. They are discriminated against because of their minority or disadvantaged status, they are discriminated against within their own racial, ethnic and socio-economic groups, *and* they are discriminated against by predominantly male policy formulation.

Even when the performance of girls in our schools is exemplary, this successful performance comes about in spite of an unbelievable amount of sexual harassment. Recent research in gender equity has identified a high level of sexual harassment in schools. A majority of students (81%) say that they have experienced some form of sexual harassment during their school lives, with one quarter of the sexually-harassed girls specifying school staff as the perpetrators. It was also found that less than 10% of the harassment was reported to adults (AAUW, 1993). Harassment in schools is so common, girls tend to see it as an inevitable part of the educational process.

THE NEED TO PREPARE TOMORROW'S WOMEN FOR THEIR NEW ROLES IN A CHANGING SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT CALLS FOR EXTENSIVE CHANGE IN THE WAY IN WHICH WE EDUCATE. IT IS UNLIKELY THAT EXTENSIVE AND SUCCESSFUL CHANGE WILL COME ABOUT IN THE NEAR FUTURE IN THE ABSENCE OF A COMPREHENSIVE PLAN.

Inequitable educational attitudes, policies and procedures for girls have been so institutionalized and school personnel are so insensitive to it, the adults in our schools often fail to understand the rationale or see a need for Title IX of the civil rights legislation that protects against sexual harassment. One school administrator's reaction to the implications of externally prescribed gender equity: "Does this mean that boys and girls will have to use the same restroom and shower facilities?"

The need for providing educational opportunities in keeping with the new, emerging roles of women in our society requires extensive change in the educational system. Unfortunately, as in the case of change in the education of minorities and disadvantaged students, school efforts usually have been only pressure-responsive and fragmented. Changes take place in the school as a reaction to the pressure exerted by individual and community complaints, state and national legislation, and court-ordered action following litigation, not as a result of a systematic plan adopted and implemented by the schools as a way of extending educational opportunities for girls. Nor is it likely that extensive and successful change will come about in the near future in the absence of such a comprehensive plan.

The development of a comprehensive plan for gender equity should not pose a difficult challenge for our school districts. Using the same blueprint which has served us well in the development of expanded educational opportunities for minority and disadvantaged populations, we can formulate a comprehensive plan for gender equity.

Changing Educational Paradigms

The need to prepare tomorrow's women for their new roles in a changing social and economic environment calls for extensive change in the way in which we educate. Unfortunately, reform measures have not always led to extensive change in our schools' performance. On the contrary, it is not unusual for reform measures to exacerbate school problems, with the target population performing worse after the implementation of the reform effort than before.

In an article by David Osborne, co-author of *Reinventing Government*, the greatest obstacle to innovation in government is identified as "the power of outdated ideas" (Osborne, 1993; Osborne, 1992).

"It's easy to dream up new approaches to problems," states Osborne. "People do it all the time. The hard part is selling them to those who still see the world through old lenses."

If the greatest obstacle to innovation in government is the power of outdated ideas, the greatest hope for innovation in government, and in schools, is the power of new ideas.

As described by Osborne, the word "paradigm" was popularized by Thomas Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. A paradigm, he says, is an accepted

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model or pattern with a set of assumptions about reality (Kuhn, 1970). Kuhn describes human behavior as consistent with a paradigm, seeing and conceptualizing not what is there, but what is expected to be seen in keeping with previous experience.

Kuhn's description can help us understand why it is so difficult to bring about gender equity in our schools. The behavior of the school is consistent with past paradigms; what educators see and conceptualize in the education of female students, while inconsistent with reality, is firmly grounded in expectations developed from previous perceptions.

Osborne's application of Kuhn's paradigm to government needs little transformation for application to the education of women in the schools. As in government, there is little hope for improvement in the education of girls unless we restructure our thinking about women, particularly our thinking about women in the reality of a new American social order.

The treatment and performance of female students will not change until such time as a new paradigm is developed, accepted and implemented. This new paradigm must prescribe educational practice through 'new lenses' that see *all* students of so-called atypical populations in a new and different context. The new, more powerful roles women and minorities are to play in a changing social order, rather than in the subservient roles of yesteryear, must be recognized and valued.

The old paradigm assumes that *some* children are valuable; the new paradigm insists that *all* children - male and female - are valuable and therefore must receive equitable treatment.

The New Paradigm

For a new educational paradigm to be successful, it must incorporate the three characteristics which have been so successful in previous school innovative programs: the valuing of all students; the provision of support services; and the establishment of new interrelationships among home, school and community.

The first characteristic, the valuing of students, is key to the attainment of the two other characteristics and, similarly, is key to the improvement of educational opportunities for female students.

While we would hope that our school would value all children because of their intrinsic worth, this has not been the case in the past and there is little reason to believe that it will be the case in the near future. If anything, demands upon the school for the provision of gender equity have resulted in increased resentment against this challenge to the performance of the school. Many schools and school personnel yearn for a return to the days when "women acted like women" and did not disrupt traditional educational practices.

AS IN THE EDUCATION OF MINORITY STUDENTS, THE KEY TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN EQUITABLE SYSTEM OF EDUCATION FOR YOUNG WOMEN RESTS IN THE ADAPTATION OF ALL ASPECTS OF SCHOOL OPERATION TO THE UNIQUE CHARACTERISTICS AND NEEDS OF FEMALE STUDENTS. SUCH A SYSTEM MUST BE BASED ON A NEW PERCEPTION OF WOMEN'S ROLES IN MODERN EDUCATIONAL PARADIGMS.

The difficulty in establishing gender equity in schools is further compounded by a lower value, or even negative value, given women in the larger society. Regardless of the shortcomings of the school, we must admit that the attitudes and prejudices of the school simply reflect the attitudes and prejudices of the larger society.

Therefore, the valuing of females should lead to the development and implementation of adequate support structures inside and outside of the school, support structures needed due to the many conditions in schools and in the larger society currently impeding the performance of female students. It is not necessarily the responsibility of the school to provide for all the needs of children and their families, but it is the responsibility of the school to communicate with the larger community and its service agencies to insure that obstacles affecting the school performance of female students are adequately addressed.

The third characteristic of a new gender equitable educational paradigm is the creation of new partnership relationships among the school, the home, and the larger community. These relationships are essential for creating mutual respect based on the assumption that each of the three entities has a vested interest in the successful schooling of girls. These relationships provide an opportunity for the clarification of the overlapping roles of the three entities, opening doors for extensive interaction and allowing for cooperative planning and participation by the three entities in making decisions that impact all students.

A Comprehensive Plan for Gender Equity

Rather than piece-meal responses to pressure situations, schools should develop a comprehensive approach to gender equity based on a gender equitable educational paradigm. The comprehensive approach outlined here is based on the ten elements developed by Blandina "Bambi" Cárdenas and myself in 1968 for *The Theory of Incompatibilities*, a work addressing the education of atypical children (Cárdenas and Cárdenas, 1973).

The affirmative steps provided in the following ten elements are not intended to be exhaustive. On the contrary, educators are urged to continue seeking ways in which the adaptability of the school can be extended to provide female students an equitable education.

I. The school system adopts a philosophy of education conducive to gender equity by the recognition that:

- The role of females in our society has undergone extensive change in recent years.
- It is the responsibility of the school to provide equitable learning opportunities for both boys and girls.
- It is not the responsibility of the school to make decisions about curricular or career selection for female students, but to extend career options and provide female students the opportunity to make feasible personal choices from an unrestricted and wide variety of options.
- Neither pregnancy nor parenthood are barriers to schooling.

II. School governance provides equitable treatment by insuring that:

- Rules and regulations are equally fair for both male and female students.
- Students from both sexes have equal opportunity for participation in all curricular and co-curricular activi-

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ties of the school.
- The school creates policies and procedures to prevent the sexual harassment of students.
- Incidents of sexual harassment are treated as unacceptable behavior in staff and students, and are dealt with by disciplinary action comparable to other forms of unacceptable behavior.

III. The school program is broad in scope and taught in sequence:
- Gender equity is developmentally integrated in all areas of the curriculum.
- Gender equity is age-appropriate at all grade levels.

IV. The development and implementation of the school curriculum is multi-featured, including:
- All curriculum materials reflect equitable treatment of males and females.
- Instructional materials are void of sexual stereotypes and discriminatory language.
- Instructional programs enhance the self-esteem of females through visible inclusion and an equitable balance of male and female source materials.
- Instructional methodologies provide equitable attention, treatment and support for male and female students.
- The instructional program develops understanding and respect for members of the opposite sex.

V. Gender equity is enforced in co-curricular activities as evidenced by the following:
- The school takes responsibility for providing and encouraging student participation in a wide range of choices in physical education, sports, organizations, clubs and other co-curricular activities.
- The school encourages and facilitates female participation in co-curricular activity historically precluding young women's participation.
- Equitable financial, personnel and other resources are provided for co-curricular activities of special interest to members of each gender.

VI. School staffing reflects the school's commitment to gender equity, adhering to the following guidelines:
- The school provides student accessibility to both female and male role models.
- The school system reviews hiring and promotion practices to insure that employment opportunity is not denied due to gender, marital status, or parenthood.
- The school is especially sensitive to the need for female personnel in non-traditional staff positions.
- School staff is sensitive and receptive to gender equity in all aspects of schooling.
- Appropriate training conducive to gender equity is provided to school staff.

VII. Student personnel services are characterized by gender equity practices, including the following:
- Guidance and discipline are equitable for both sexes.
- Male and female students have access to counseling personnel of their respective gender.
- Career guidance for students includes the discussion of non-traditional options.
- Schools prevent the tracking of students on the basis of gender.

VIII. The non-instructional needs of students are met, including:
- The school assists students in meeting personal needs which may be unique for each gender.
- Schools provide support services for victims of sexual harassment, acts of violence and rape.
- Schools provide information and support services for the prevention of unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.
- Schools provide information and services for girls that are pregnant and students who are parents.

IX. Parents are involved in the school in meaningful ways, including:
- The school provides for the extensive involvement parents of students of both sexes.
- The school makes an extra effort to involve parents from non-traditional families such as teen parents, single parents, step-parents and extended family members.
- Parents are encouraged to accept their children's pursuit of non-traditional educational and career choices.

X. School evaluation is equitable:
- The school disaggregates performance data to compare the performance of students from both sexes.
- Evaluation techniques are varied to prevent sex bias.
- Test items are analyzed for inherent sex bias.

Conclusion

Schools have been no more enamored of affirmative action programs than other entrenched institutions. Bringing change to our schools in order to provide for the equitable treatment of students of both genders will be slow in developing unless a comprehensive program is systematically adopted. Such a program must be based on a new and different perception of women's roles in modern educational and societal paradigms.

Procedures followed for the development of comprehensive equitable programs for other atypical school populations can be adapted to provide a systematic approach to gender equity. As in the education of minority students, the key to the development of an equitable system of education for young women rests in the adaptation of all aspects of school operation to the unique characteristics and needs of female students.

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